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ABSTRACT

THE INABILITY TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW AND THE RELIANCE UPON OVERUSED QUESTIONS AND IDEAS PREVENT MANY STUDENTS FROM WRITING SUCCESSFUL FEATURE ARTICLES. TO WRITE A GOOD FEATURE, THE REPORTER SHOULD (1) PICK A PERSON OR SUBJECT WORTH WRITING ABOUT, (2) ALLOW ADEQUATE TIME FOR AN INTERVIEW, (3) LEARN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE BEFORE THE INTERVIEW, (4) TAKE NOTES, (5) CENTER THE FEATURE AROUND ONE IDEA, (6) PRESENT THE FACTS IN AN ANECDOTE OR SHORT NARRATIVE, (7) GIVE THE FEATURE AN INTERESTING BEGINNING AND ENDING THROUGH SUCH DEVICES AS DYNAMIC STATEMENTS OR DIRECT QUOTATIONS, AND (8) AVOID TRITE IDEAS AND GIMMICKS. SINCE PERSONALITY SKETCHES MAKE UP MOST OF THE FEATURE STORIES IN NEWSPAPERS, THE WRITER SHOULD CONCENTRATE ON STUDENTS WHO ARE, IN SOME WAY, OUTSTANDING. OTHER TYPES OF FEATURES INCLUDE THOSE THAT SUPPLY HISTORICAL, INFORMATIVE, OR BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE. BECAUSE PEOPLE WANT IN-DEPTH INFORMATION ABOUT EVENTS AND OTHER PEOPLE, THE SCHOOL NEWSPAPER CAN UTILIZE AS MANY FEATURES AS ONE PER PAGE. (LH)

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Featuring The Personalities

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Straight-forward, school oriented, easily-understood, practical information here follows on what the headline above indicates the article is about. This down-to-earth treatment of this topic is a reprint of a pamphlet of the Interscholastic League Press Conference carrying the same headline above. This pamphlet appears here with the permission of Dr. Max R. Haddick, Director of Journalism, The University Interscholastic League, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

Why is a comic book more appealing to more teen-agers than a text book?

Simple. The comic book tells a story, and everybody likes a story. Keep that in mind the next time you write a feature.

Read these examples and decide which of each pair you like best.

(1)

Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492. He made the voyage in three ships, the Pinta, the Nina, and the Santa Maria. According to his log, the trip took 70 days.

Columbus's trip was without doubt one of the most important voyages in history. It resulted in a radical change in the economics, politics, and the very civilization of the globe.

The Santa Maria was a decked wooden ship of 100 tons and a crew of 52 men. The Pinta was a ship of 50 tons and 18 men, and the Nina, 40 tons and 18 men. The three ships set sail at 8 A. M. on Friday, Aug. 3, 1942.

(2)

Chris's heart fluttered at half mast as his flagship, the Santa Maria, drifted slowly away from port. He was embarking on a strange and perhaps terrible voyage—a voyage that no man had ever dared make before.

Would he ever see his home, his friends, his beloved land again? What terrors lay in that uncharted ocean into which his ships were heading?

Chris turned and looked into the setting sun, and suddenly his spirits soared with the laughing seagulls. He was off on an adventure, a voyage which was destined to change the very civilization of the world.

(3)

The world should have sat up to take notice on Nov. 3, 1946. That's when Imon O. Cowhand was born.

Now, 17 years later, Imon is a handsome, 6 ft. 12 in., 190-pound, blue-eyed, brown-haired senior.

He attended Northside Elementary School and entered Zero High School as a freshman four years ago.

A very popular member of the senior class, Imon is a two-year letterman on the football team and a star on the basketball and track teams. He is also secretary of the senior class and a member of HAMS, amateur radio club.

When asked what his likes and dislikes were, Imon answered, "Oh, I like most everything and everybody." He added that about the only thing he doesn't like are "people who brag too much."

Imon's "ideal" is five-foot-two with eyes of blue and hair of blonde. His favorite food is fried chicken, and his favorite movie star is "any old chick."

His ambition is to be a radio announcer.

Good luck, Imon. We know you will have a successful future.

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(4)

Many students like to travel, but Imon O. Cowhand has talked his way around the world.

One of the most avid members of HAMS, amateur radio club, Imon likes to twirl the knobs of his short wave set in hopes of picking up something unusual.

As he was twirling one night, Imon's heart took an extra beat when he heard a young man's voice talking Russian. (Imon doesn't speak Russian, but he has the ham's knack of being able to recognize foreign languages).

He had long hoped to make contact with a Russian ham, and here at last, he thought, he had found one.

Just about that time the voice said, in a solid Texas drawl, "OK, Hank, thanks for the practice. Maybe we can study Russian together again next week, *nyet?* This is....., Austin, Texas, over and out."

Although Imon himself has never been out of Texas, his voice has been heard on every continent. He has made friends in numerous far away places through his radio, and his room is lined with ham cards from all over the world.

Although Imon's radio is high on the list of his best lovers, it often takes a back seat to such activities as athletics (he has lettered in football, basketball, and track) and class projects (he is secretary of the senior class).

But he hopes that someday radio will become a fulltime activity, for his ambition is to become an announcer for the coast-to-coast radio or television network.

Unless you're destined to become chief statistician for the FBI, surely you preferred No. 2 and No. 4.

So why do many high school newspapers carry features like No. 3? There are probably two reasons. First, because that's the way the paper's features have *always* been written Secondly, poor features result from lack of preparation *before the Interview.* Most high school reporters could never be accused of writing with *malice* of forethought, but many are guilty of *meagerness* of forethought. A nearsighted seagull following to a toy ship in a deserted swimming pool will get a full stomach sooner than an unprepared reporter will get a full interview. With all the imagination of a clerk filling out an employee's personal data sheet, the beginning reporter too often opens an interview with such searching questions as (1) when were you born, (2) how old were you when you started school, and (3) how many toes do you have on your left foot? (And, being in a cynical mood, we can't help wondering how many high school reporters would sense a story if these were the answers: (1) "June 27, 1950 — my name is Rhea, you know." (2) "Seven and a half years." (3) "Thirteen.")*

Laziness is part of the reason for poor interviews — and consequently, poor features. Shyness and lack of imagination are also to blame. And some aspiring reporters are just plain stupid.

This scene is probably occuring in high school news rooms all over the nation at this very moment:

The editor sends a reporter to get a feature on Harry Aips. The re-

*—A sharp reporter would (1) discover that the United States entered the Korean War on June 27, 1950, and that the interviewee was named after South Korean President Syngman Rhee: (2) if the subject was born on June 27 and entered school seven and a half years later, he must have entered in December — the "why" of which might produce an interesting story; (3) most people have only — oh, skip it.

But all this goes to prove that any question might produce a story. The unpardonable sin of journalism is to include uninteresting answers just because you have them in your notes and to conclude the interview before you have something worth making into a feature story.

porter comes back with the usual trite stuff. "Is this all you got?" asks the editor. "Yep. That's all Harry told me," replies the reporter. "How long did you interview him?" asks the editor. "Oh — about five minutes. At the beginning of algebra class while the teacher was calling the roll," replies the reporter. "Oh," says the editor.

So the editor (and we're assuming this is a very hip editor) sends the reporter back to continue the interview. And he gives the reporter a few kindly hints, such as:

"Now get this, you flea-brained square. You get Harry talking about his favorite subject—and *you listen!*"

"How do I get him to talk?" the reporter asks.

"By bringing up an idea he's interested in. Don't ask him a list of questions he can answer with one word, like "What's your favorite food?" Tell him, for example, that the 30-yard field goal he kicked last Friday was a real beauty, and then ask him what he thought just before the ball was snapped and how he felt when he saw the ball sail between the goal posts."

"But Harry doesn't play football," the reporter protests.

The editor picks up a telephone directory and tears it in half. When his blood pressure drops to the boiling point, he says: "Harry does *something*. Otherwise we wouldn't have picked him for a feature. Find out what his main activity or his main interest is *before* you talk to him."

"Oh," says the reporter.

"And then, when he warms up to the subject and starts talking, you listen. You'll have to ask some questions, of course, to get a background on this main idea — how did he get interested in football, how did he happen to develop his place-kicking ability? And get something about the future—does he hope to play football in college and then pro ball?"

"But Harry doesn't play football," the reporter says.

At this point the editor dies of a heart attack, and the feature on Harry Aips comes out like all the other features—giving his likes (friendly people) and dislikes (conceited people), his most embarrassing moment (which is too embarrassing to talk about), his favorite food (fried chicken), his ambition (to graduate), and his age, height and weight (which are approximately the same as those of his classmates.)

Writer Gives Some Rules

Summing up the late, lamented editor's valuable but unheeded advice, we might formulate the following set of rules for writing feature stories:

1. Pick a person or subject worth writing about. If the person you are interviewing has done nothing, there is little one can say about him. That's why the old "senior personality" page has just about disappeared (thank goodness) from high school papers. Why write about a senior who has done nothing more outstanding than sit in a classrooom for 12 years when there are underclassmen who have had experiences, thoughts, and accomplishments worth writing—and reading—about?

2. In order to get a complete interview, there must be ample time for it. Make an appointment with your subject-before or after school, or during a study period. *Not* between classes or while the teacher is calling the roll!

3. Learn something about your interviewee *before* you begin the interview. Thus you have some ideas with which to get the conversation going. When the interviewee gets warmed up about an experience or an accomplishment or an ambition, let him talk. When he is finished, ask enough questions to fill in the blank spots and to round out the story. Remember that

the essence of a feature story is individualism. A story on Harry Aips should be about Harry and no one else. Too many high school features are so written that by simply changing the name and one or two statistics, they will fit half the students in school.

In directing the interview along the channels that you want to write about, don't overlook the possibility that your interviewee may have another story tucked away better than the one you are seeking. Let's say that you plan to interview the head cheerleader, expecting the story to revolve around her cheerleading experiences. You have prepared questions on how she decided to try out, how long she practiced secretly at home before trying out, the new yells she has invented, etc. But during the interview, you discover that she went to elementary school in Hong Kong. No doubt the cheerleading business will become a strictly minor item, and you will change your line of questioning to build the story around her Hong Kong experiences.

How To Take Notes

4. Take notes. But try to train yourself to remember most of the conversation. Many people become shy and clam up when they see a reporter taking down every word they say. Write down important, easily forgotten facts, such as dates, names, and amounts; and now and then jot down a direct quotation. But try to keep note taking to a minimum. *However,* if you find that you can't rely on your memory, it is much better to take full notes and risk shutting up your interviewee than it is to garble his words and come out with a feature full of errors.

5. After the interview, in preparing to write the feature, review your notes and select the *one idea* that is most interesting. Write a catchy lead that will introduce the idea, and then stick to that idea throughout the feature. Be brutal about discarding anything that doesn't fit in. This is where most high school feature writes err. They try to write a complete biography in 200 words. It can't be done.

Note in example No. 4 above that the lead introduces Imon's interest in radio. *The feature discusses nothing else.* A few other facts are mentioned to round out the feature and tell the readers exactly who he is (we learn that Imon is an athlete and secretary of the senior class), but these facts are subordinated to and tied in with the main idea—his interest in radio.

Omit 'Pet Peeves'

Note that very few of the tired old feature facts—favorite food, most embarrassing moment, pet peeve—are used. Imon's ambition is included because it ties in with the main idea, radio. Hearing the "Russian" talking may have been his most exciting moment; it wasn't labeled as such, however—the reader is left to reach that conclusion for himself.

6. Try to present your facts in anecdote fashion. An anecdote is a short narrative; it may be defined as a very, very short-short story. Let's take feature No. 4 again. The writer wisely decided to limit the feature to one idea, but this does not guarantee that he will produce a readable story. Suppose he had presented his facts like this:

Imon O. Cowhand is one of the most avid members of HAMS, amateur radio club.

He received his first short wave set when he was 10. Since then he has talked to other hams in 26 foreign countries.

He has often tried to talk to someone in Russia, but he has never succeeded.

Imon's ambition is to be a professional radio announcer after he graduates.

The story obeys the first rule of feature writing—it sticks to the main idea like chalk to a wet blackboard. But it makes dull reading.

By taking Imon's desire "to talk to someone in Russia" and presenting it in anecdote form, the writer of feature No. 4 made his article much more entertaining.

An anecdote is a complete little story, with beginning, middle and end—and, if possible, with suspense or humor or pathos thrown in.

You may have room for only one or two anectodes in your feature; but a feature with one anecdote is infinitely more interesting than a feature with none.

How To Do It

How do you get anecdotes? By listening to your interviewee talk. Most people relate their experiences in narrative form. Of course, if you ask questions that can be answered in a word or two, you won't get any stories. Get your man talking and you'll end up with more than you can use.

7. Beginning and ending the feature present special problems. As a good journalist, you well know that many of your readers will go no farther than the first paragraph of a news story. In a news story this is nothing to fret about—perhaps you're such a good news writer that you can whip up a lead in the streamlined fashion that gives the hurried reader all he needs to know. But in a feature story it's an insult.

When I have a student who just can't produce a good feature story lead, I find that this suggestion sometimes works: Go on and write the complete feature without worrying about a lead. Then go over the finished story and pick out the most interesting paragraph and make that the lead.

There are, of course, countless ways to begin a feature story, but the following types perhaps constitute the great majority of feature leads. If the suggestion in the preceding paragraph doesn't work for you, you might try writing five leads—one for each type listed here—and then select the best one.

Dynamic statements. Example: If John Jones had not had polio, he may never have become a star football player.

Dynamic question. Example: Have you ever failed a test because you studied so hard?

Arousing direct quotation. Example: "I've lived in 14 states. and I like Texas best of all."

Analogy. Example: "All that glitters is not gold," they say; but gold doesn't always glitter either. John Jones has some specimens in his rock collection to prove it.

Parody. Example: Mary had a little hot rod; her friends all thought they'd have a ball; but everywhere that Mary went, the car was sure to stall.

How To End It

And then finally there comes time to end the feature. Why do so many writers end with "Good luck, Joe"; or, "We know you'll make it, Joe"; or, "It's been fun to know you, Joe"? These endings show an effort on the part of the writer to find an effective conclusion. But they also show that he didn't make a very big effort.

Perhaps the best way to end a feature is to quit before you are finished. That is, when you get to the point where you stop writing and ask yourself, "How shall I end this?" — stop! You are already through. If you can find a punch line, or a quick wrap up of the main idea, okay. But don't ruin a good feature by taking on a lousy ending.

8. Avoid trite ideas and gimmicks. The "This Is Your Life" method of presenting a personality feature was pretty good the first time it was used.

It became trite the second time. Let it lie dead for another 50 years and then it will be a good again.

What Kind Of Feature?

Personality sketches (stories about people) make up the bulk of feature stories in high school newspapers as well as in metropolitan dailies.

An experienced professional feature writer can probably write a good story about any person he meets. The high school journalist would do well to select persons who are obviously good story material.

Your subscribers like to read about the outstanding students—class and club officers, star athletes, top scholars, the leading actor and actress in the forthcoming play, the drum major, the state slide rule champ.

The heads-up editor will assign personality feature stories to tie in with current news (these are also called background features). For example, Sue Cuticle is elected homecoming queen. Your paper will, of course, carry a news story giving the facts of the election. Your paper will really sparkle if it also carries a feature story about Sue: what's responsible for her popularity, what other similar honors has she won? And *here's* your chance to mention such statistics as height, weight, and eye color (people like to know these things about queens and sweethearts, but not about senior class presidents and valedictorians). Be alert for historic or unusual tie-ins. Perhaps Sue's mother or older sister was homecoming queen, or perhaps Sue's father made the winning touchdown at the homecoming game when he was a senior.

Students with unusual hobbies, or those who have done unusual things with unusual hobbies make good feature subjects. Note here that dancing, reading, listening to phonograph records, and dating are not hobbies, except in rare cases.

Reading, for example, is a hobby only when there is a definite pattern to the reading (and usually the hobbyist collects certain kinds of books). To illustrate, a boy who is actually making a study of detective fiction from Poe to Ian Fleming might honestly say that reading is his hobby. A student who reads any old thing he can get hold of—comic books, Macbeth, day before yesterday's newspaper, the fine print on a Wheatie's boxtop—is merely killing time.

Students who have made interesting trips, or those who have lived in unusual places or attended unusual schools may be written up.

This is far from a complete list of possible personality feature subjects. A writer with a good nose for news will smell out any number of students with interesting stories to tell. But be careful. Here is a sad tale that is often true: a new staff member is told to write a feature. He has a good friend named Zoe Dull. He tells Zoe he is going to write a feature on her and then starts the interview The reporter eventually wakes up to the fact that Zoe has never done anything or said anything or thought anything worth writing about. So he finds himself in a real dilemma. Must he tell Zoe that he can't write the feature after all—and probably lose her friendship. Or must he write the feature—with nothing to write about —and risk the wrath of the editor? Feature writing is one situation in which the egg must come before the chicken. If you find the chick first, *you* might lay the egg.

HISTORICAL FEATURES appeal even to students who wouldn't be caught dead in a history class. Historical features may recount colorful past events in the history of your school. These are doubly interesting when they tie in with current events: your school will have a new football stadium next fall. The last game in

the old stadium is about to be played. A feature on the old stadium might include brief anecdotes on some of the most thrilling games played there, the championships won (and lost) there, some of the former football greats who played there. Tie in a few meaningful facts—such as school enrollment when the stadium was built compared to present enrollment—and you will have a feature that will be avidly read by students and ex-students alike.

Source for historical features? Old files of your school and community newspapers; interviews with old grads and with teachers who have been around since grandma was a flapper.

INFORMATIVE FEATURES include "how to" and "do it yourself" articles. But don't let the name fool you. The assignment to write an informative feature doesn't give you license simply to list facts. You still need the narrative style—the anecdotes—to make your story readable.

Material for informative features abounds in every school. You might write on how to watch a football game (surprisingly few people know how), the school's traditions, how the band prepares for a half-time show, the origin of the school song, how to find a book in the library.

BACKGROUND FEATURES are the pride and joy of metropolitan newspapers and the despair of high school dittos. A background feature gives sidelights, overtones, and undercurrents of news events. The news story presents the actual facts as they happened; the background feature may give the facts, ideas, emotions, and preparations that led up to or accompanied the event.

The background feature may give the opinions and viewpoints of people connected with the event. It may interpret the event. In other words, the news story is the focal point of the picture, and the background feature provides the scenery, the shadows, the border, and even the frame. You've heard of "reporting in depth"? Just beatnik slang for background features.

When Russia sent Sputnik I soaring through space, every American who had ever walked through a science lab was interviewed for expert opinions. On one page I read an article explaining why Sputnik didn't fall and another predicting when it would fall. Government officials told why Russia had beaten America in releasing a satellite. Every scientific advance from the day an apple konked Isaac Newton on the skull was reviewed.

When Rice knocked Texas A. and M. out of a national football championship, the Houston papers devoted four-fifths of their sports section to stories on how the players felt, how the coaches felt, how the coaches' cats felt, and how many times a Southwest Conference team had done a dastardly deed to another SWC team in the past.

Paul VI rated a double-column news story on the front page of the Houston Post when he was named pope. The event also produced some excellent "in depth" material in the same newspaper on the same day.

These are background features. Although some of us may feel that the papers overdo it, they have a reason —the best reason in the world: when people are interested in something, they want to read about it—in depth.

A final word about features: write some. Too many high school newspapers fill their columns with meaningless drivel like song dedications, the top songs of the week, worn-out jokes, tiresome gimmicks, and gossip columns. Fill each page of your paper with well-written news stories plus one well-written feature, and your paper will win readers, prestige, and contests.